

Washington, DC -- Congressman Vern Buchanan (FL-13) took federal officials to task today for the cost of last June's premature tomato alert regarding Florida tomatoes. Buchanan questioned the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) Deputy Associate Commissioner, Dr. Steven Solomon, during a congressional hearing regarding the agency's response to recent food recalls.

"Last year, the FDA devastated tomato growers in my district by issuing an alert only to find later that the problem was associated with peppers – not tomatoes," said Buchanan, who questioned the guidelines used by the agency to issue an alert.

"Initial case control studies showed tomatoes appeared to be the most likely vehicle...at the point and time the decision was made to issue alerts," said Solomon.

Florida's tomato industry suffered an estimated \$250 million in losses as a result of a Food and Drug Administration advisory in June that mistakenly linked tomatoes and salmonella.

The Congressman noted that Manatee County produces approximately 40% of the tomatoes grown in Florida and asked Solomon if it is ever appropriate for the federal government to reimburse growers for losses associated with false alerts.

The FDA representative responded, "No, the FDA does not have reimbursement authority to growers or small businesses."

"I know personally I have been through some of these packing facilities and talked to these farmers and we are talking millions of dollars because of these early alerts; basically they lost most of their crop and opportunity for that season," added Buchanan. "You know, many of them live from week to week or month to month so it was a huge economic impact in our area and I think there should be some consideration.... when our federal government makes a mistake."

Buchanan cosponsored H.R. 6581, which would have directed the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to make payments to members of the tomato industry who were unable to market their crops as a result of the premature advisory.

The House Small Business Committee Subcommittee on Regulations and Healthcare hearing entitled "The Impact of Food Recalls on Small Businesses", examined the efforts of small businesses to ensure food safety and losses suffered by small businesses indirectly impacted by food recalls. Recommendations included modifying the SBA disaster loan program to provide assistance to small businesses that are adversely affected by a product recall.

A video clip of the Congressman questioning Solomon is available at the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ds2HEm4kCFA&feature=Playlist&p=5D8D3A42AF9A0F6E&index=9>